

VZCZCXRO6033  
OO RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR  
DE RUEHRH #1396/01 2941350  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
O 211350Z OCT 09  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1741  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI IMMEDIATE 0008  
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI IMMEDIATE 0926  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 0373  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001396  
NOFORN  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/19/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#) [YM](#) [IR](#) [LY](#)

SUBJECT: GROWING SAUDI ALARM OVER THREATS FROM YEMEN

REF: A. SANAA 01937

[1](#)B. RIYADH 1343

RIYADH 00001396 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith,  
reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

SUMMARY & COMMENT

[1](#)1. (S/NF) In meetings this week with Ambassador Smith, senior Saudi officials voiced growing alarm over the deteriorating security situation in Yemen. The Foreign Minister assessed that the Houthi insurgency could not be resolved through negotiations. Assistant Minister of Defense Khalid bin Sultan described the Al-Qaida presence in Yemen as Saudi Arabia's biggest external threat. Neither FM Saud nor Prince Khalid shared details regarding the precise nature of the Saudi response to the threat, but their comments support our analysis (ref b) that the Saudi approach is focused on reinforcing border security, containing the Al-Qaida threat, and supporting, to the extent possible, the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh. The SAG remains convinced that interference from Iran and others is making the situation worse. Khalid bin Sultan commented that one constant regarding Saudi policy towards Yemen was the need to preserve the country's unity.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) FM Saud's comment that a negotiated settlement with the Al-Houthis was "impossible" suggests that the Saudi government is unlikely to press the ROYG for a peaceful end to the Saada conflict, and will likely be responsive to additional ROYG requests for financial assistance. It is less clear whether the SAG is prepared to provide weapons recently requested by Saleh. However, while it appears that the Saudis are willing to provide some logistical support along the border to ROYG forces, and have on at least one occasion exchanged fire with Houthi forces along the border, we do not/not see evidence that the SAG has any intention of further involvement. Embassy continues to assess that border security --in particular, the interdiction of terrorists planning operations inside the Kingdom-- is the key Saudi concern and that the Saudi government will refrain from becoming involved in operations inside Yemen. End summary & comment.

SAUD AL-FAISAL: NEGOTIATED HOUTHI SETTLEMENT IMPOSSIBLE

[1](#)3. (C) During an introductory meeting on October 17, Ambassador Smith asked Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal for his assessment of the situation in Yemen. Describing the government of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh as "weak" and embattled, Saud said the situation was compounded by defiance of the tribes which had formerly supported the government in the North, the infiltration of terrorists and the Al-Qaeda network, and interference by Iran and unspecified "others." Elections in Yemen had only exacerbated the country's tribal divisions, Prince Saud argued, and made dealing with the country's overwhelming social and development problems even more difficult. Saudi Arabia had a large aid program with Yemen, but had been unable to overcome "tribalism."

[1](#)4. (C) Unless Saleh received help in confronting the Houthi insurgency and placating Southern secessionists, his government could collapse, which would be a "nightmare" for

Saudi Arabia. Acknowledging SAG concern regarding the Saada War, Prince Saud nevertheless said he felt that no negotiated settlement was possible with the Houthis.

KHALID BIN SULTAN: YEMEN IS BIGGEST EXTERNAL THREAT

15. (S/NF) In a separate introductory meeting with the Ambassador on October 19, Assistant Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Sultan echoed the concerns voiced by the Foreign Minister. Beyond the Saada War, the growing Al Qaida presence within Yemen's deteriorating security situation now represented Saudi Arabia's most serious external threat. Yemen was "a much better ground for Al Qaida" -- they had freedom to buy weapons, the tribes often shifted alliances and they were near the Saudi border. Prince Khalid said he had asked for a greater exchange of information with US military intelligence, in particular "what was going on in the Al-Houthi/Al Qaida relationship."

16. (C) Adding to Saudi worries was their conviction that Iran was supporting the Houthi insurgency. "We understand that you disagree," Prince Khalid noted, adding that Libya was RIYADH 00001396 002.2 OF 002

"also sending money." The Houthi situation was very dangerous. There had been an exchange of fire between the Saudi Coast Guard and suspected Al Houthis an hour before the meeting (about noon on October 19). (COMMENT: Prince Khalid used the word "Coast Guard" in English, but could have meant to say "Border Guard." It is unlikely that the Coast Guard would have been involved in a skirmish in the Saada border area, and also unlikely that the Houthis would have been engaged on the Yemen/Saudi border at the coast. End comment.)

17. (C) Discussing what could be done about the situation, Prince Khalid noted that his father, Crown Prince Sultan, understood the tribes very well, since he had held the file since 1962. The late King Abdulaziz had conquered Yemen twice, with Saudi forces commanded by then-Prince Faisal. That experience taught the Al Saud that Yemen could only be governed by Yemenis. Acknowledging worries about Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's ability to manage the multiple challenges from the South, AQAP, and the Houthis, Prince Khalid concluded that Saudi Arabia had "no alternative but to support him (Saleh)." The answer was to keep Yemen united and improve economic conditions.

DETAILS ON SAUDI SKIRMISH WITH HOUTHI FORCES SKETCHY

18. (S/NF) Beyond Prince Khalid's confirmation that the Saudi Coast (or Border) Guard had indeed exchanged fire with Houthi forces, Embassy has been unable to obtain further details regarding the October 19 incident. Press reports described Houthi allegations that Saudi forces had fired into the Yemeni Al-Hassama district, which is situated near the border in Houthi-controlled areas (NOTE: The Al-Hassama district is located approximately at 16.48N/43.14E. End note.) YEMENI REQUEST FOR WEAPONS?

19. (S/NF) As noted in ref a, Yemeni Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs Dr. Rashad Mohammed Al-Alimi delivered a letter from President Saleh to King Abdullah in Riyadh on October 18. This was followed by the announcement by the Saudi Press Agency that Crown Prince Sultan had received a call from President Saleh in Agadir, during which the two men reviewed the latest developments and discussed bilateral issues. Sensitive reporting suggests that Saleh was pressing for additional assistance, including weapons. Additional details will shortly be available in sensitive channels. It appears that the SAG is weighing the request within the context of the assistance promised by the Arab League and GCC. FM Saud had earlier suggested that consultations on Yemen were ongoing.

SMITH